

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S NATURE OF HUMANISM IN HIS PLAYS CHANDALIKA AND NATIR PUJA

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ABSTRACT

A critical study of Tagore's life, philosophy and social outlook, reveals that he is essentially and intensely a humanist. All his writings—poetry, prose, fiction, drama—are characterized by a superabundance of humanism—man is a man irrespective of his birth, caste, creed, social status, power and pelf. Humanity is the very essence of Tagore's philosophy of life, breathing the spirit of humanism. Love of man as man and dignity of man as man signifies the underlying principle of humanism. Humanism may be defined as a system of beliefs and standards that is primarily concerned with common human needs and not with religious principles. It seeks to explore ways of solving human problems based on reason rather than reposing faith in God. It strives to repudiate dogmatism, ritualism, and the like. In other words, humanism is a philosophy or attitude that addresses itself exclusively to human as opposed to divine or supernatural concerns. As per his view, a humanist is a follower of the philosophy of humanism, keeping in the focus of his mind the wellbeing of all living beings in general and that of man in particular. This paper explores how much Tagore talks about humanity in almost all of his plays.

KEYWORDS: Humanism, Philosophy, Ritualism, Human Values, Untouchability, Caste & Creed

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INTRODUCTION

“When a man begins to have an extended vision of his true self, when he realizes that he is much more than at present he seems to be, he begins to get conscious of his moral nature” 1

“Bigotry tries to keep truth”, says Tagore, “safe in its hand with the grip that kills it”. 2.

Through the medium of literature Tagore sought to disseminate his philosophy of humanism in an era and world order torn by strife, violence, selfishness, superstition, irrationality and so on. Genuine faith and reverential adoration, which characterize a true religious creed, had come to be replaced by an order of things entrenched in orthodoxy and ritualism. Love and kindness which are the loftiest attributes of man were supplanted by hate and narrowness. Tagore's literary endeavours appeared as a beacon light in the midst of darkness.

It may, however, be noted that Tagore's humanism is broad and all-embracing. His view was that “the whole world is love, for love gives it birth, sustains it, and takes it back to its bosom.” 3 He was a relentless seeker after truth and was sad to note “There is ugliness in the distorted expression of beauty in our life and in our art which comes from our imperfect realization of Truth.” 4 He believed that “the vision of paradise is to be seen in the sunlight and the green of the earth, in the beauty of the human face and the wealth of human life”. 5 Making a crucial distinction between ‘pleasure’ and ‘goodness’, he observed that “pleasure is for one's own self, but

goodness is concerned with the happiness of all humanity and for all time.” 6

It can be seen that in his writings.

STUDY OF THE PLAYS

Tagore appears as a reformer, underscoring the paramount value of man regardless of his caste, creed and social status. He focuses his attention on the pervasive and endemic evils of his time and presents them as odious things to be shunned. For example, he rejects the stranglehold of the caste system in the play Chandalika. Untouchability is a stigma which must be blotted out and ostracized from society. Irrational orthodoxy and ritualistic religion have come under his hammer in plays like Sacrifice, Malini, and Red Oleanders. The main accent is laid on humanity rather than senseless traditions. Animal sacrifice has nothing to do with religion and it should be banished as a barbarous practice. Orthodoxy leads to fanaticism and frenzy of the most inhuman kind. Religion, according to Tagore, is not religion if it is not humane and altruistic. The play Muktadhara shows that science and technology unmindful of man's welfare are a curse. Nature should be allowed its unobstructed flow.

Tagore is opposed to gross materialism which results in greed, cruelty and soullessness, because it prompts man to ignore humanity. The play Red Oleanders deals with the problem of labourers in gold mines. It is sad that workers are treated merely as machines, not as human beings. In the play there is a realistic picture of their plight. Cruelties committed on them can be judged from the fact that they are not called by their names but by their numbers. Their identity is thrown into the background. Furthermore, they are no better than prisoners. Their life symbolizes one of bondage and thralldom. Tagore pleads that poverty, hunger, unemployment and the other accompanying evils must be removed from society.

The pathetic side of human life has been portrayed in the play The Post Office and Sanyasi. The handicapped boy, Amal is keen on seeing the world outside his window. He is shut up like a prisoner. He aspires for freedom to be able to see the beauty and bounty of Nature. The play Sanyasi is intensely human. When the Sanyasi comes to know that Vasanti, a child, he declares that “she can never be dead.” It would be “death to all”. 7 If she died, as a Vedantist, Tagore drew his inspiration from the Upanishads. He rejected the view that Vedantic philosophy was concerned with the world as an illusion. He believed that this philosophy is predominantly humanistic. Through the Sanyasi he indicates that Vasanti is “the spirit of all that is”. 8 Thus, Tagore discarded the doctrine of the world as an illusion, upheld the theory of Karma and subscribed to the principle of fullness of life here on this earth.

Plays like Chitra, The King of the Dark Chamber and Karana and Kunti deal with the higher conception of spiritual beauty and grace as opposed to physical beauty. In fact, beauty and ugliness are part of Nature. Tagore chose to favour Nature's law in comparison to man-made law. Nature's law is free from bondages. The play Karna and Kunti repudiates the law of man. In fact, Nature is supreme and we must pay obeisance to it.

It is evident that as a humanist Tagore is a harbinger of a new era and a new set of human values. His humanism urged him to demolish the barriers of caste, creed, sex, status and the like. Insularity must crumble before humanity. In fact, in the world of his vision, there is no room for the myopic view of life. His writings in general and his plays in particular are a powerful vehicle of his philosophy of humanism. His plays lay the supreme accent on truth, goodness, beauty, love, freedom and kindness. A world free from fear, exploitation and slavery is his paramount ideal. He dreams of an ideal world is “where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...” 9 It can be seen that the pronounced phenomenon of ‘humanism’ in Tagore's plays is a fruitful endeavor from the point of view of research.

CHANDALIKA

“When a man begins to have an extended vision of his true self, when he realizes that he is much more than at present he seems to be, he begins to get conscious of his moral nature.”¹⁰ The story of the play, *Chandalika*, deals with caste system in India. It has been taken from a Buddhist tale. It is the story of a very sensitive girl who is born and brought up in an untouchable caste family. The family of Prakriti is deprived of its innate rights due to the caste system and old traditions in vogue. The incident of coming of Ananda, the disciple of Lord Buddha, in life of Prakriti, an untouchable girl, awakened in her the awareness of her rights as a woman. The acceptance of water from the hand of a *chandal* (a low caste girl) brings a reawakening in the meaningless life of Prakriti. In a reply to her mother she says firmly, “*I respect him who respects me. A religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags. But since that day something forbids me to conform any longer. I’m afraid of nothing now.*”¹¹ This voice of Prakriti is a protest against the caste system.

No body loves Prakriti other than her caste or her family members. Ananda shows love for Prakriti as human being is loving creature of God. Being a member of an untouchable society, she has no well-wisher in the entire world for her. Tagore believes that, “*.. that man is the most miserable of all beggars, who has to beg for love.*”¹² Tagore is of the view that man has made the divisions among the society and he himself has become enemy of each other. In a lecture delivered by him he says, “*We too have suffered at the hands of man—not tigers and snakes, not elemental forces of nature, but human beings. Men are ever the greatest enemy of Man. I had felt and known it; all the same, there was a hope, deep in my heart, that I should find some place, some temple, where the immortal spirit of man dwell hidden like the sun behind clouds.*”¹³

The play shows the narrow mindedness of the society of how the untouchables are rejected by society. That is why Prakriti is not even aware that she is also a human being and as a member of the society, she also has the right to live with honour when he comes to Prakriti to drink water at the well. She tells him that she belongs to an untouchable class. In spite of this, Ananda asks for water. “*If the black clouds of Saravana are dubbed Chandal, he said what of it? It doesn’t change their nature or destroy the virtue of their water. Don’t humiliate yourself, he said; self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder.*”¹⁴

This incident gives Prakriti the message that she also lives in this world as a woman and as a human being. Ananda makes her recognize herself as a member of the society. So she falls in love with Ananda. She says, “*Let him raise that truth, that flower from the dust, and take it to his bosom.*”¹⁵ As a Buddhist, Ananda does not believe in caste and creed and drinks water from the hands of Prakriti. He says to Prakriti, “*Give me water..... As I am human being, so also are you, and all water is clean and holy that cools our heat and satisfies our thirsts.*”¹⁶ Ananda is the first man who asks for water from the Chandal girl. The reply of Ananda to Prakriti, “*..... he belonged to our kind,*”¹⁷ shows complete humanness in him. That is why he does not effuse to drink water from Prakriti. This reply of Ananda binds all human beings in a community i.e. Man. Prakriti feels proud and wonders that a man, dust of whose feet she cannot dare to touch, is praying before her for a little water.

The meaning of the name of Chandal girl ‘Prakriti’ is significant. Nature does not distinguish between lower and higher castes. Nature distributes its gifts without prejudice. So she also does not distinguish between caste and creed, high and low, great and small. Higher and lower castes are made by man. The eternal forces of Nature set no store by these man-made things which are temporary. At last Ananda brings her out from “the house of darkness.” The play shows the

meaningless of the caste system. Tagore thinks that the tyranny is mostly tolerated by women. The aim of dealing with the problem is to reform the society and to give the message to women that women are not inferior to men. Therefore, Tagore is of the view that *“Women alone can in a moment overstep the bounds of castes; When once the curtains of destiny are drawn aside they all stand revealed in their queenliness.”* 18 He is aware of the poor condition of women. He tries to raise the status of women in society by their own consciousness. Tagore appreciates Buddhism regarding caste system as there is no distinction between high and low castes, all men of the Earth are same. On the other hand he criticizes some of the rituals and the practices that are adopted by the followers of the Buddha in Natir Puja.

NATIR PUJA

Lord Buddha taught that selfishness is the chief evil of human life. His preaching known as Buddhism, was a religion of proper moral conduct and not a religion of priests, temples, gods, sacrifices or rituals. Buddhism was a revolt against social injustice, parochialism and selfishness. In Natir Puja Tagore criticizes some of the unwelcome traditions and rituals of Buddhism. It shows a conflict between devotion and ritualism in religion. He is of the view that in order to attain divinity, renunciation of the world is not necessary. One can attain divinity by one's devotion and duty. He believes that the religion of the Buddha stands for service, love, peace, non-violence and fraternity and keeps the welfare of humanity as its ultimate goal. Through the character of Lokeshvari, the Queen-mother of Magadha, Tagore criticizes the rituals of renunciation and abandonment. Queen Lokeshvari, who is an entirely devoted disciple of the Buddha, sees that the new creed has damaged the loving world of a woman and razed its well-settled home, life's natural phenomena. The wave of renunciation has flung away women on the barren and perilous sandy shore. Her world has been snatched in the name of religion, which is against both motherhood and humanity. She thinks that her son is used as a lure to attract people. Therefore, a woman opposed the ritual in the form of Lokeshvari. The motherhood of Lokeshvari turns bitterly against a religion that has deprived her of her husband and her son. Now she has nothing to offer as she has emptied her whole world. She says, *“My only son, my prince, my Chitra—they've lured him away and made a monk of him, and now they ask me for an offering! They cut the root of the creeper and then they ask for flowers.”* 19

Lokeshvari has absolute faith in Lord Buddha. She has lost her faith in sacred verses, as they are powerless before arms. With power and arms Ajatsatru usurps the throne of his father against law and cause the destruction of the world of the Queen-mother. She thinks that only weapons can return the greenery of her world. Her son Ajatsatru becomes king while his father is still alive. Her husband gives up his kingdom and retires to live outside the city and spend his days in meditation and prayer. Then it comes to her mind that this religion is false. There is no use of noble sentences. Arms are the solution of every problem. The effect of Buddhism on the mind of people has made her helpless. Lokeshvari wants her husband and her son back at any cost, even to banish the religion of love and peace from the kingdom. She says that it is in hand of a king to allow a new creed in his kingdom or discard it. She appreciates the teachings of the Buddha but not at the cost of her world which is limited in her man and son. When she comes to know that Ajatsatru has gone to fetch Devadatta, she says, *“The coward! A King who dares not rule! Surely I am living proof how little power the Buddha's teachings have. Yet he dare not even defy that falsehood without the backing of that empty fellow Devadatta.”* 20 This damages her belief. Everything in this world is worthless for her now. She thinks about religion from another point of view. She thinks that only cowardly people adopt this religion. They have no power in their hands. They adopt religion as a refugee. She says to Mallika, *“This religion of the weak makes folk, that is its purpose.”* 21 She forgets the welfare of humanity, which is the essential part of the teachings of the Buddha. The followers of Buddhism do not believe in the caste system. All people,

rich or poor, great or small are equal before them. The Buddha has refused the authority of the Vedas and the Upanishads that only Brahmins are superior to the people of other castes and only they have the right to worship God. According to him, worship cannot be the monopoly of one caste. That is why he freed his disciple from all castes. As a result, on the birthday of the Buddha, on the Vasant Purnima day, Srimati, the Nati, is chosen for the worship by the order of the senior Bhikshus. The story shows that Tagore is a great humanist and has consideration for the poor people who belong to lower castes and untouchables. The religion of the Buddha teaches us that there should be no distinctions between man and man. Tagore is totally influenced by the philosophy of Lord Buddha.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that Tagore's humanism is embodied in his plays in an abundant measure. It is true that Tagore's humanism is reflected distinctly in all his writings. But his plays are characterized by it to a great degree and in a pronounced manner. His humanism is all-embracing and encompasses all spheres—Man, Nature, Animals, Vegetation and so on. His heart-felt sympathies go out, particularly to those who are deprived, dispossessed, handicapped, oppressed and exploited. Forbidding of animal sacrifice in the name of religion, breaking down of caste barriers, and waking up of the social and moral conscience of the people are the bulwark of his humanism to work against extremism subversive of love, kindness and compassion.

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